Unraveling A. S. Byatt's "Racine and the Tablecloth"

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Abstract

A. S. Byatt's story "Racine and the Tablecloth" (1987) has received little critical attention, even though it appears at a pivotal moment in her career. Nonetheless, Byatt herself highlighted its importance when she published "Arachne" (2000), a reflection on Ovid that further articulates the inspirations and themes of the earlier story. Considering these two texts as companion pieces, this article sets out to unravel Byatt's metaphor of the text as a fabric woven together from heterogeneous threads, first by setting this concept in the context of Roland Barthes's theories about textuality, then by tracing how "Racine and the Tablecloth" is itself spun from a multiplicity of sources and ideas that exist in dynamic tension: Byatt's own experiences, Euripides, Ovid, and of course, Racine.

A.S. Byatt's short story "Racine and the Tablecloth," from her first collection *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987), is woven together from a number of interlacing threads that are reflected in the story's title, from the elaborately manufactured plots of Racine's plays to the intricate skill of embroidering a tablecloth. This metaphor also reflects the influence on Byatt of theoretical ideas about the constructed nature of a literary text, whereby a text is viewed not as the homogeneous product of an author's genius but as a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture," as Roland Barthes famously puts it in "The Death of the Author" (1968) (146). The critic's task, continues Barthes, proceeds from a recognition that in this "multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking)" (147, original italics). Byatt repeatedly uses this metaphor

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of weaving and embroidery in her work to explore the theoretical notion of intertextual multiplicity in the production of her literary texts. The erudition of her writing, with its proliferation of allusions and background knowledge, thus invites the reader and critic to undertake the task of disentangling the various threads of "Racine and the Tablecloth" in order to understand the story in all its rich complexity.

Despite appearing at a pivotal point in Byatt's career, "Racine and the Tablecloth" has received little serious attention from critics. In their essay "Epistemology and Curriculum" (2002), Andrew Davies and Kevin Williams point to Byatt's story as an example of pedagogical practice gone wrong. Their brief analysis focuses on Emily Bray, the story's protagonist, and the way her budding passion for the French playwright Jean Racine is juxtaposed to her teacher's lack of enthusiasm. "Obviously," observe Davies and Williams, "pedagogic sharing is not the only route to learning," without delving any further into the complexities of the text (266). Mariadele Boccardi, in her study *A.S. Byatt* (2013), devotes only a single paragraph to this story before concluding that, by emphasizing the academic interests of Emily (and later, her daughter Sarah), "Byatt is amending the inherently sexist assumption that a woman's aspiration is for creativity – something non-rational and therefore, in this view, properly feminine – rather than intellectual engagement" (93). Jane Campbell, in *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (2004), makes a similar point, adding that the way the story shifts from Emily's concept of an "ideal" (rational, masculine, authoritative) reader "to a non-mythical, small *r* reader" suggests a positive evolution in attitudes toward gender and creativity (85). While a handful of critics have touched on this story, none have considered its full complexity by unraveling the various clues that Byatt weaves into her text.

Despite the lack of a detailed critical response to this story, Byatt herself has highlighted its importance in a number of ways – its position as the opening tale in her first collection of stories, for instance, is surely some indication of its significance. In a 2003 interview with Jean-Louis Chevalier, Byatt talks about the influence of Samuel Beckett on her short story "The Chinese Lobster," the final piece in *The Matisse Stories* (1993), stating that one of her reasons for choosing that title "is to do with Beckett, because there is 'Dante and the Lobster,' which I think is one of the greatest short stories" (Chevalier). Shortly afterward, Byatt reflects further: "It struck me . . . [that] 'Racine and the Tablecloth' . . . actually goes with 'The Chinese Lobster,' because it's got the rhythm of the Beckett story, again, 'Dante and the Lobster': 'Racine and the Tablecloth,' and it's a kind of another homage to the impossibility of writing short stories as good as that one – ever" (Chevalier). Byatt then considers how the protagonist's concept of an ideal reader grew, in part, from her "despairing sense that there wasn't a reader" for her early work, so she invented a mental image of her own ideal reader, "somebody rather like Henry James" (Chevalier). It is also noteworthy that *Sugar and Other Stories* was published in 1987, a point in Byatt's career that, although she was already

established as an author, precedes the commercial and critical breakthrough that came with her novel *Possession* (1990), which won the Booker Prize and made her one of the leading British writers of her generation.

The Importance of "Arachne"

The importance of "Racine and the Tablecloth" only really emerges, however, when it is considered alongside an essay by Byatt titled "Arachne." "Arachne" first appeared in *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2000), a book by Philip Terry, who asked a number of leading writers to contribute their thoughts on the Roman poet Ovid. Byatt's essay is structured as a web of four intertwining threads: an autobiographical thread, in which Byatt reflects on the childhood experiences that would lead to the writing of "Racine and the Tablecloth;" a thread about actual spiders and their biology; a meditation on the tale of Minerva (Athene) and Arachne as recounted in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; and an analysis of Velázquez's painting *Las Hilanderas* (1657), long thought to be a genre painting until its reinterpretation, in the mid-twentieth century, as a visual representation of the Arachne myth. "Arachne" functions as a nonfictional companion piece to "Racine and the Tablecloth" that, as María Jesús Martínez Alfaro points out, extends further the metaphor of weaving and spinning, "as if there was a never-ending thread of connections, of versions of versions, and reworkings, and retellings" (Alfaro).

The autobiographical origins of the story revealed in "Arachne" show the extent to which Emily Bray's experiences are modeled on Byatt's own. It also clarifies some of the shared thematic concerns of the two pieces, particularly the tension between society's contradictory expectations for young girls with regard to domesticity and learning. "Needlework of all kinds is a woman's art," writes Byatt. "For that reason, perhaps, I hated it as a child" (Byatt, "Arachne" 136). Her childhood self instead finds fulfillment in reading Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), especially the cruel, climactic scene "where Venus drives her claws and fangs into the woman's [i.e., Phaedra's] flesh, when the woman dies in a fury of sun and blood and heat and terror with the gods in her veins" (137). Byatt's own headmistress, like Miss Crichton-Walker in the story, makes a comparison between having "written books and made tablecloths," observing that while "each was good in its kind," tablecloths "were more honest, and better, and gave more pleasure . . . [and] were useful" – the implication being "that Racine was not" (138). There is thus a feminist dimension to both the autobiography and the fiction, in which Byatt asserts the right of women to intellectual endeavors, to have ambitions beyond the domestic sphere.

Such a conclusion is complicated in both texts by the figure of the great-aunt: Florrie in "Racine and the Tablecloth," Thirza in "Arachne." These two aunts are an extension of Byatt's critique of the suppression of the female intellect:

Florrie, for instance, had ceased her formal education at the age of fourteen, but continued to develop her mind by reading "Dickens and Trollope, Dumas and Harriet Beecher Stowe" (*Sugar* 22). Florrie's desire to travel abroad and expand her mind is curtailed by the expectation that she sacrifice her desires and ambitions to take care of her relatives, with Byatt implying that the "embroidery she'd always done, beautiful work of all kinds" is a socially acceptable outlet for a vibrant creativity otherwise starved of expression (23). Despite her critique of domesticity, Byatt notes that her "story, . . . unlike my eighteen-year-old self, was not against tablecloths" – indeed, she points to an equally feminist affirmation of the "female arts, the work of the needle, the quilt, the garment" that would, in turn, become "the image I had in my own mind of the things I wrote . . . the thread that persisted, connected, continued" ("Arachne" 138). In the same movement, therefore, Byatt engages in a feminist critique of the expectation that women be limited by domesticity, while at the same time celebrating the creativity of the "female arts."

This double movement exemplifies the complex strands of Byatt's critical process, which is characterized by a constant desire to double back on itself in order to examine the consistency of its own premises. The story's title indicates this inclusive approach, comprehending both Racine *and* the tablecloth, academics *and* domesticity: terms that co-exist in tension with each other rather than in negative opposition. Byatt seeks to examine the particularities of each of these dimensions in order to consider the distinct values and drawbacks they represent. This principle of dynamic tension is a hallmark of Byatt's fiction, from the antagonism between artist and critic she explores in her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), the conflict between modern and Victorian values in *Possession* (1990), the critical opposition between biographical and poststructural criticism in *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), and the paradoxes of parental authority and political revolution in *The Children's Book* (2009). The complexity of Byatt's texts requires readers who understand that their constituent discursive threads are replete with contradictions and tensions, a "multiplicity of writing," as Barthes puts it, that never allows her work to settle into a straightforward or ideological meaning ("Death" 147). Byatt's approach means that, as Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes observe in the introduction to *A.S. Byatt: The Essential Guide* (2003), "everything is connected and inclusive. One idea will always lead on to another as nothing comes to her singly" (5).

The Author-God and the (Auto)biographer

The best place to begin unraveling the various threads of "Racine and the Tablecloth," perhaps, is Emily Bray's childish attempt to deal with the multiplicities that threaten her by inventing an ideal reader, an imaginary being who, in contrast to her teachers, is able to understand perfectly the nuances of her writing:

> She had written for an imaginary ideal Reader, perfectly aware of her own strengths and failings, her approximations to proper judgments, her flashes of understanding. . . . If the real Reader did not exist it was necessary to invent Him, and Emily did so. The pronoun is an accurate rendering of Emily's vaguest intimation of his nature. In a female institution where justice, or judgment, was Miss Crighton-Walker, benign impartiality seemed to be male. (Byatt, *Sugar* 6)

This passage is characteristically overdetermined with meaning, from the reference to Voltaire to the theoretical notion of the ideal reader. Byatt weaves together these heterogeneous discourses by creating an implicit parallel between the theological questioning of divine authority (God as author of the world) and the rise, in literary theory, of the (secular) investment of meaning in the reader. This theoretical idea reaches its culmination in Barthes's influential critique of the "Author-God" in "The Death of the Author."

In that essay, Barthes launches a powerful attack on the notion of the author as someone who, as an act of expression, writes down their innermost thoughts onto the page. This expressive model of authorship, argues Barthes, is a historical aberration that is belied by the "neutral, composite, oblique space" of writing "where our subject slips away" (142). Using famous examples of authorial subversion such as Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés* (1897), in which the verses are cut up and reordered according to random sequences, Barthes contends that modern literature has repeatedly sought to undermine the idea of the artist as the only source of creativity. Barthes's attack was aimed particularly against the academic trend toward biographical criticism, in which the "*explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (143, original italics). From the insights into language and writing revealed by modern literature, Barthes reimagines writing as a task where the author is no longer seen as creating e*x nihilo*, but instead as a weaver of prefabricated words and ideas that are "always anterior, never original" (146). Barthes's conclusion installs the reader, rather than the sovereign author, as the key locus for the interpretation of the text. "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed," he writes. "[T]he reader . . . is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (148). Barthes recasts the act of reading as a kind of performance, so that each time a text is read its context and meaning slip and change, in the same way that no two dramatic performances are the same.

While Emily's notion of an ideal Reader is different in various ways from the notion of the Author that Barthes is examining, the two concepts nonetheless clearly arise from similar anxieties about writing and interpretation, which are theoretically resolved by the creation of a transcendent authority who eliminates

hermeneutical disparities. Barthes couches this notion in theological terms, arguing against the modern idea of the "Author-God" whose task is to imbue the text with a "single 'theological' meaning" (146). While Emily does "not associate the Reader with the gods worshipped in the cathedral on Sundays" (Byatt, *Sugar* 8), her delirious experience in the final exams, where her "argument threaded itself" like "a fine line embellished by the bright beads of quotations" (28) closely resembles the model of writing described by Barthes. Her life-changing experience in the exam allows her to see the multiple threads and influences that have brought about her current state, permitting her to understand that her ideal Reader was only a "mythical being, that it was not possible to live in his light" (Byatt 30). In both Byatt and Barthes, therefore, the transcendent fictional entity created by the reader is undermined by a religious skepticism, a mistrust of interpretive methods that attempt dogmatically to suppress the inherent multiplicity of meaning.

The deeper meaning of this resistance in "Racine and the Tablecloth" only comes to light, once again, when read in the light of its companion piece, "Arachne." In that essay we learn two important and interconnected things. The first is that "Racine and the Tablecloth" is inspired by Byatt's own experiences, that Emily Bray is modeled on herself, Miss Crichton-Walker on her childhood headmistress, and Sarah on Byatt's own daughter. This autobiographical aspect immediately raises problems for, in the light of Barthes's critique of the Author-God, how are we supposed to use this information? Is it permissible to deploy such details, or is doing so to indulge in a "theological" misreading of the text? Secondly, Byatt starts out "Arachne" with some theological considerations of her own. "Some gods," she begins her essay, "take on more reality as you grow older. You are caught up in, brush up against their original power in odd times and places" (131). A skeptic from a young age, Byatt writes about how, as a small child, she would surreptitiously read books about Greek and Norse myths in class. "In those days, there was no question of belief," she recalls. "They were stories, and I used their accounts of gods and goddesses to diminish the importance of the Bible stories, which I was expected to believe" (131). These divine powers seem unreal, distant, illusions that even a small child can see through – yet, recounts Byatt, "at the end of my schooling, I was beginning to see that the gods were more real and dangerous than I had supposed as a small girl, reading my story-books" (137). Reading Virgil's *The Aeneid* or, like the protagonist in "Racine and the Tablecloth," Racine's *Phèdre*, she felt a sudden emotional connection with these stories of the divine, "a more real, invisible world, where things were bright, not tedious, terrible, not humdrum" (137). How seriously, then, must we take this peculiar affirmation of the divine in Byatt, especially when juxtaposed to the apparent disbelief on display elsewhere in her work?

Byatt uses these "theological" terms not in their religious sense, but as metaphors to describe what might be called the "unconscious" of the text – its slippages, its lacunae, the "multivalent or the 'free'" principle, as she writes in

Possession, that simultaneously brings disorder and structure to the text (456). "Everyone senses," writes Barthes (in his book on Racine, no less), "that the work *escapes*, that it is *something else* than its history, the sum of its sources, influences, or models" (*Racine* 155, original italics). Every text thus comes into existence according to a structuring principle, a notion of order that simultaneously opens onto a state of dynamic tension with the terms of its own disorder and multiplicity. This idea can be seen in the recurring theme of biography in Byatt's work, for instance. In *Possession*, Mortimer Cropper gives a public lecture titled "The Art of the Biographer," in which he uses a cavalcade of "white screens and light-beams, sound-effects and magnifications" to convey his ideas (Byatt, 416). As a rhetorical device, he inserts himself into this projected space to remind his readers of the biographer's concealed role as the interpreter of the subject's life:

> From time to time, as if by accident, the animated shadow of Cropper's aquiline head would be thrown, as if in silhouette, across these luminous objects. On one of these occasions he would laugh, apologise, and say half-seriously, carefully scripted, *there* you see the biographer, a component of the picture, a moving shadow, not to be forgotten among the things he works with. . . . The historian is an indissoluble part of his history, as the poet is of his poem, as the shadowy biographer is of his subject's life. . . . (416)

In *The Biographer's Tale*, this idea is raised to a new level of self-reflexivity, with the novel's protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, retracing the steps of the biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes in order to write, as it were, the biography of a biographer. Nanson discovers that Destry-Scholes, in accordance with the looser conventions of his time regarding intellectual property, frequently recycled quotations from other sources "lifted whole, or loosely rewritten" in his biography of Elmer Bole (*Tale* 36). Rather than being outraged by what would now be seen as plagiarism, Nanson instead comes to see these "lifted sentences, in their new contexts, . . . [as] almost the purest and most beautiful parts of the transmission of scholarship," and begins his own collection of quotations to be used, he tells the reader, in much the same way the builders of the great cathedrals in Chartres and Saint-Denis had "raided previous works," recycling "ancient mosaic cubes" from places like Byzantium (36).

This passage from Byatt's novel is given a further twist when we consider that Nanson's idea of collecting quotations has a famous precedent in Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben recounts in *The Man Without Content* (1970), "for his entire life pursued the idea of writing a work made up exclusively of quotations" (104). Benjamin recognized that "the authority invoked by quotation is founded precisely on the destruction of the authority that is attributed to a certain text by its situation in the history of culture" – that is to say, the act of recontextualizing a quotation means to evoke the textual order from which it derives while simultaneously destabilizing it (104). These two examples help to answer the

question of how the reader should treat the biographical elements of "Racine and the Tablecloth" revealed in "Arachne." Byatt's image of the biographer as a shadowy figure, a concealed organizing principle whose existence is subsumed by the act of writing, is made all the more enticing by the fact that "Arachne" is autobiographical – the author, in this case, becomes aware of her *own* shadow, her *own* unconscious, alongside which she exists in dynamic tension. This splitting is the symptom, in turn, of a larger rupture by which the text is revealed as a multiplicity of discursive threads, of which the author's biography forms only a single strand. Here, Byatt sheds light on an all-too-often misunderstood point of Barthes's text – not that the author is "dead" in the sense that their biographical details are meaningless or unimportant, but that all texts must be read as complex objects that no *single* hermeneutical key can unlock. The idea that biography could provide such a key, Barthes argues, is a peculiarly modern prejudice, the product of a confluence of influences "insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual" ("Death" 142). If we examine the attitudes toward language and writing that fall outside the peculiarities of modernity and its valorization of the individual, Barthes contends, we discover that "the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator" through whom language (especially divine, prophetic, or creative language) speaks (142).

This deconstruction of the Author-God thus links back to that other "theological" question, Byatt's evocation of the divine in "Arachne." In addressing this topic, it is worth noting that Byatt is an avowed atheist who, reflecting in 2009 on her Quaker upbringing, describes herself as decidedly "anti-Christian" (Byatt, "Writing"). In a 2010 interview with Charlotte Higgins, furthermore, Byatt says directly that "religion is dead" and remarks ironically that, rather than believing in God, she "believe[s] in Wallace Stevens" ("Wallace"). This atheist position is reflected in both her fiction and nonfiction by her repeated references to the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. Byatt initially encountered Feuerbach's ideas in her research on George Eliot, for example, examining the impact of *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) on Eliot (who translated this book in 1854), in the essay "George Eliot's Essays" from *Passions of the Mind* (1991). In *Possession*, the poet Randolph Henry Ash alludes to Feuerbach's commentary on the Lazarus story, in which Feuerbach demythologizes the biblical episode by arguing that it was "only the product . . . of human Desire embodying itself in a Tale" (184). In *Angels and Insects* (1992), William Adamson, when discussing religion with the pious Harald Alabaster, defends his atheism by evoking Feuerbach: "We need loving kindness in *reality*," says Adamson, ". . . so we invent a divine Parent . . . and convince ourselves that all is well" (104). In *Ragnarok* (2011), a book that reimagines the world of the gods only to depict its downfall, Byatt describes her approach to retelling the Norse myths:

> I always had in mind the wisdom of that most intelligent thinker about the gods, humans and morality, Ludwig Feuerbach. "homo homini deus est," he wrote, describing how our gods of Love, Wrath, Courage, Charity were in fact projections of human qualities we constructed from our sense of ourselves. He was talking about the incarnate god of Christianity, a God in man who to Feuerbach was a man made god. (169)

Byatt's own religious position is therefore unambiguous – for Byatt, "for Vico, also for Feuerbach," writes Gillian M. E. Alban, the gods "are expressions of people's own need" (17). In "Arachne," in her reflections on the origins of "Racine and the Tablecloth," Byatt nonetheless seems to contradict this antireligious position by talking about the emotional impact of the gods she encountered in both Virgil and Racine, who in the process of reading are transformed from distant stories to something alive and powerful.

Order and Disruption: Euripides and Racine

If we take Feuerbach's thesis seriously that the gods are a projection of humanity's emotional desires, however, Byatt's position is perfectly consistent – in her encounters with the gods, what she is responding to is not their divinity but the power of the metaphors contained in their stories. The primary myths that Byatt deals with in "Racine and the Tablecloth" are signaled by the story's intertextual references to Euripides's play *Hippolytus* and Racine's retelling of the same story in *Phèdre*. Because of "Arachne"'s importance as a companion piece, we should also add the myth of Arachne as it is retold in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The common threads that tie these stories together are twofold. The first thread concerns the way in which Byatt uses these myths to explore the hierarchies of power, the forces that bring order to the world. This idea is a dominant theme in Byatt's work, as various critics have highlighted, from Suzanne Keen's exploration of *Possession* as an example of the postmodern fascination with reexamining and contesting history in *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (2001) to John Su's analysis of the theme of collecting (and its attendant process of organizing) in Byatt's fiction. Jane Campbell points out that Byatt "has a need and love for order" that "plays against the sense of contingency," a recurrent dynamic tension that simultaneously arranges and destabilizes her texts (8). This theme represents a variation on the author/reader interplay, except that its concerns step beyond the pages of the text in order to comment on the prevailing order of the larger world and humanity's place in it. The second thread that ties these three myths together is the way in which they question gender roles, with a particular focus on the expectations placed on women. The antagonistic structure of "Racine and the Tablecloth," which pits Emily Bray against Miss Crichton-Walker, each representing two incompatible notions of how women ought to think and behave, recurs in the story's intertextual references: the tragedies set

in motion in *Hippolytus* and *Phèdre* are the product of a divine rivalry between the goddesses Aphrodite (Venus) and Artemis (Diana), whereas Ovid's tale of metamorphosis tells of a weaving contest between Arachne, a mortal woman, and Athena (Minerva). These parallels are woven into the fabric of Byatt's story in a way that both illuminates and complicates its central ideas.

If Byatt's textual strategies echo the ideas of Barthes about the interwoven, multiple nature of the text, as my approach here suggests, then her choice of intertextual references, Racine in particular, might at first seem at odds with her postmodern aesthetic. If we take, for example, the famous distinction that Barthes makes in *S/Z* (1970) between "readerly" texts, which are narrow and didactic in scope, and "writerly" texts, which, on the contrary, invite the reader "to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it," then the kind of authors we would expect to encounter as examples of the latter surely fall into the realm of modernist experimentation (Barthes, *S/Z* 5). Yet few critics seem to have noticed that Barthes's own in-depth analyses of "writerly" texts are not of Proust or Mallarmé or Joyce, but Balzac, the founder of French realism, and Racine, the great classical tragedian. In the introduction to *On Racine* (1963), Barthes writes:

> [B]y a remarkable paradox, the French author most frequently associated with the idea of classical *transparence* is the only one to have made all the new languages of the [twentieth] century converge on himself. . . . [I]t is ultimately his very transparence that makes Racine a veritable commonplace of our literature, the critical object at zero degree, a site empty but eternally open to signification. If literature is essentially, as I believe, a meaning advanced and at the same time a meaning withdrawn, Racine is doubtless the greatest French author; . . . [his] sovereign art of accessibility . . . permits him to remain eternally within the field of any critical language. (viii)

The exemplary status of Balzac and Racine as "writerly" authors in Barthes's understanding of literature shows that this term is not inextricably tied to the experimentation of modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, the influence of these same two authors on Byatt is evident in her work: the character of Seraphita Fludd, for example, is a nod to Balzac's mystical novel *Seraphita* (1834), while Fergus Wolfe in *Possession* is writing his doctoral dissertation on Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), a work "that had apparently already deconstructed itself" (*Possession* 37). Racine, too, turns out to be an important influence on Byatt's work, both in this story and, as we shall see, elsewhere in her writings.

Let us begin, however, with Euripides, whose importance as an intertextual reference is crucial despite receiving only a passing mention in Byatt's story. Euripides's play *Hippolytus* proceeds from the dynamic tension between two goddesses: Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sexuality, and Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt, their opposition signaled to the audience by the statues of each goddess being placed on opposite sides of the stage in the opening scene.

Euripides thus establishes from the outset his interest in ideas about women, a questioning of their place in Greek society that, in modern times, has become one of the most famous and controversial aspects of his work. His female characters in *Hippolytus* deliver some notable lines on this theme – "I was a woman – a thing hated by everyone," says Phaedra (95), while her nurse observes, "Trouble may wait a precious time for men to mend it–/Unless a woman gets to work and finds a way" (97) – although Euripides's most confronting creations in this respect are *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, which feature women whose strength and independence repeatedly disrupt the *patrios nomos*. In *Gender and Communication in Euripides' Plays* (2008), J. H. Kim On Chong-Gossard confirms the critical consensus that "Euripides' interest in women is a well-known feature of his work," although it remains a matter of much debate whether that interest is positive or negative (4). "Euripides," points out Sarah B. Pomeroy in her book on women in antiquity, "was the only tragedian to acquire a reputation for misogyny" (223).

Byatt borrows not only this ambivalent theme of disruptive femininity in her story but also some storytelling strategies that are clearly influenced by Greek tragedy. In the very first sentence of "Racine and the Tablecloth," for instance, the narrator ponders whether Miss Crichton-Walker" is the "antagonist" of the story, referring to the ancient practice in Greek theater of having two main actors (protagonist and antagonist) on the stage (although by the time of Euripides, this convention had been surpassed) (Byatt, *Sugar* 1). Byatt also approximates the Greek chorus through her use of the story's narrator, who provides commentary on the main action and, at certain points, unexpectedly disrupts the flow of the narrative to address the reader directly. Most important of all, though, is the way Euripides, like other Greek tragedians, explores the dynamic tension between order and disorder. The Greeks saw the world as possessing an inherent order, one which gods and humans, whether by caprice or hubris, disrupted constantly, and that the Fates, eternally spinning the destiny of the world, had to weave back into some kind of order. Tragedy is a self-reflexive expression of this dance of chaos and disorder, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, capable of being distilled into a set of aesthetic rules, as Aristotle does in the *Poetics*, yet always dependent on some further transgression that tests and ultimately affirms the indomitability of the divine order. That is why Euripides's portrayal of women is so ambiguous – disruptive femininity may seem like a positive trait to a modern, revolutionary feminist, but Euripides's reputation as a "hater of women" (as Aristophanes characterizes him) stems from his representation of women as chaotic and rebellious, vandals, as it were, of the existing social order (Sommerstein 2002: 167).

Reworking *Hippolytus* into his classical tragedy *Phèdre*, Racine foregrounds his female protagonist by making Phaedra, rather than Hippolytus, the focus of the action. The plot is driven by a symbolic opposition between Hippolytus (human desire) and Venus (divine order), culminating in the violent confrontation between the two that Byatt references not only in "Racine and the Tablecloth," but also in

notable scenes from the Frederica Potter quartet. The first novel in this series, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), for instance, reveals that Byatt has fictionalized her childhood memories of experiencing Racine once before, for Frederica, it turns out, is "doing *Phèdre* for A level" (264). Her characteristically uninspiring French teacher, Miss Plaskett, "set them to write endless character analyses" that made "Racine seem exactly like Shakespeare and Shakespeare exactly like Shaw" (264). Frederica mentally protests against this false equivalency between Racine and Shakespeare, insisting that there is a fundamental difference that derives not from their shared portrayal of strong women (Phaedra, Cleopatra), nor their different observances of the Aristotelian unities, but something "to do with the Alexandrine" (264). Frederica is particularly struck by two lines from *Phèdre*: "*Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée/C'est Vénus toute eutière à sa proie attachée*" / "The fire no longer slumbers in the veins./All Venus' might has fastened on her prey" (265, original italics) (Racine 161). Frederica tries to imagine the way in which Racine interweaves the imagery of Venus tearing apart her victim with the syntactical structure of the alexandrine, which despite being "divided by a rocking caesura" nonetheless forms a perfectly balanced poetic couplet (265):

> Did one *see* Venus toute entière? She had without thinking always seen a formless crouching thing, dropped from a branch, claws extended, involved in the struggling body like Stubbs's lion and horse. The outer ripping up the inner. But the verse form separated the clutcher from the clutched whilst linking them inexorably. (265)

These lines from *Phèdre* are again called to mind by Frederica in *Babel Tower* (1996), in a moment of passion with her lover, John Ottokar, to whom she feels bound by sentiment and yet, at the same time, profoundly separate: "She remembers, and with it her delight in the balance of the lines, the way they pivot on the caesura and are both separated and joined by the rhyme" (359). For Byatt, then, Racine, especially in these two famous lines, captures brilliantly the dynamic tension between the conflicting demands for aesthetic order (expressed by the classical structure of Racine's drama, with its precise alexandrines and tight plots) and the practical disorder of life's contingencies, a tension that also lies at the heart of her own fiction.

The generally cold reception of Racine by the students in "Racine and the Tablecloth" thus reflects an imaginative failure, a close-minded reluctance to try and understand what is unfamiliar to them. Their teacher repeats the principles of classical drama with a lack of enthusiasm that indicates that, despite her knowledge of the French language, an understanding of the conflicting artistic forces that drive Racine have eluded her:

> The French teacher told them that the play was based on the *Hippolytus* of Euripides[.] [. . .] She neglected to describe the original play, which they did not know. [. . .] She told them that the play kept the unities

> of classical drama, and told them what these unities were, and they wrote them down. [. . .] She neglected to say what kind of effect these constrictions might have on an imagined world: she offered a half-hearted rationale she clearly despised a little herself, as though the Greeks and the French were children who made unnecessary rules for themselves, did not see wider horizons. (*Sugar* 16)

For the students and their teacher, the tragic drama of Racine is stripped of its creative antagonism and reduced to a dull, misunderstood formula that lacks all energy and relevance, ensuring that the girls, apart from Emily, are left wondering why anyone would create such a tedious piece of art as that represented by classical drama. This attitude may be seen, in part, as the legacy of the romantic movement which, in championing the artistic virtues of rebellion and experimentation, rejected the rules of neoclassical art and literature.

In French literature, this attitude is exemplified by Stendhal's influential pamphlet *Racine et Shakespeare* (1825), written as a didactic series of letters between a fervent romantic and his classical antagonist. Taking aim at the ongoing relevance of Racine's plays, many of which are reworkings of classical tragedies, to a nineteenth-century audience, Stendhal writes: "To imitate Sophocles and Euripides today, and to maintain that these imitations will not cause a Frenchman of the nineteenth century to yawn with boredom, is classicism" (38). Stendhal goes on to contrast the classical drama of Racine with the diverse talents of Shakespeare. Racine was a fine author for his time, Stendhal insists, but it is Shakespeare's willingness to break with convention that aligns him with the experimental mindset of French romanticism. Stendhal's comments are a response to the stranglehold of neoclassicism over France's artistic institutions, a hegemony that was being challenged in that decade by the rising tide of romanticism. The symbolic turning-point in this cultural struggle was the first production of Victor Hugo's play *Hernani*, which thumbed its nose at the neoclassical principles of drama with such defiance that the play caused a riot upon its debut in 1830. In contrast to the passion of romantic theater, Racine's measured alexandrines and lack of dramatic action make him seem quaint, remote, even bloodless, incapable of engaging a modern audience that has been trained with a very different set of expectations as to how drama should be written and performed.

For his time, the position that Stendhal takes against Racine makes perfect sense. The real object of his dispute is not really Racine, after all, but the neoclassical academy in France, which sought to restrict artistic experimentation by insisting that all works of art and theater conform to its narrow aesthetic principles. The French romantics made a virtue out of rebellion from political necessity, and artistic revolution remains an integral part of their legacy even after the downfall of neoclassicism. As though providing a latter-day response to Stendhal, Byatt foregrounds the way that Emily Bray's naïve consciousness has been shaped by her exposure to the revolutionary mindset of romanticism

without being educated about the classical principles against which the romantics were rebelling in the first place. In much the same way that Phineas G. Nanson rediscovers a forgotten energy in the "outdated" method of biographical criticism, so too Emily, against the grain, finds something enticingly different about Racine's "outdated" plays:

> Meanwhile, and at the same time, there was Racine. You may be amused that Miss Crichton-Walker should simultaneously ban ladies' razors and promote the study of *Phèdre*. It is amusing. It is amusing that the same girls should already have been exposed to the betrayed and betraying cries of Ophelia's madness. [. . .] Get thee to a nunnery, said Hamlet, and there was Emily, in a nunnery, never out of one, in a rustle of terrible words and delicate and gross suggestions, the stuff of her studies. But that is not what I wanted to say about Racine. Shakespeare came upon Emily gradually, she could accommodate him, he had always been there. Racine was sudden and new. (*Sugar* 16)

In pointed contrast to emotionally driven characters like Hamlet and Emma Woodhouse that Emily writes about elsewhere in her studies, Racine offers her a window into what she (rather ironically) perceives to be a more rational and mature world. Emily turns the rebellious attitude of the romantics against itself – she rebels, as it were, against their aesthetic rebellion, using the antiestablishment logic of romanticism against itself in order to justify her admiration for order and conformity. The hegemony of romanticism makes it possible for Racine's classicism to seem, in its own way, revolutionary and new, for Byatt to rediscover the dynamic tensions that made *Phèdre* a great work of art in the first place.

Beyond the Contest: Ovid

The other main intertextual thread In "Racine and the Tablecloth" is the story of Arachne, an ancient Greco-Roman myth that is most famously recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Just like in Euripides and Racine, the narrative stems from a conflict between two female figures, but with a difference – rather than two goddesses facing off against each other, the story of Arachne, like that of Marsyas, pits the hubris of a human talent against the perfection of the divine. In Ovid's version, Arachne is a low-born woman who has become famous for her immense skill at weaving. "It was easy to see that she had been taught by Pallas," he writes, "but the girl herself denied this" (134). Pallas appears to Arachne disguised as an old woman, advising Arachne to give up her arrogance and acknowledge that her talent comes from the gods. Arachne instead issues a challenge to Pallas, who throws off her disguise and accepts. To reiterate her contempt, Arachne weaves a "tapestry which displayed the crimes committed by the gods," a flawless piece of work that leads Pallas, in a fit of rage, to tear apart the work of art and physically

attack Arachne (137). Arachne remains resolutely defiant and tries to hang herself, but Pallas takes pity and transforms Arachne into a spider, and "she yet spins her thread, and as a spider is busy with her web as of old" (138).

Apart from the connection laid out earlier between "Racine and the Tablecloth" and Ovid's tale in the form of the essay "Arachne," the other bridge between these two stories occurs in the final pages of Byatt's story, in which the narrator ponders the question: "Who won, you will ask, Emily or Miss-Crichton-Walker, since the Reader is mythical and detached, and can neither win nor lose?" (30). In "Old Tales, New Forms," a lecture originally delivered at Yale in 1999 and expanded for inclusion in *On Histories and Stories* (1999), Byatt calls attention to Italo Calvino's thoughts on the Arachne story in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988):

> [I]n an essay on Ovid, he discusses the possible interpretations of the fable of Arachne – was [Pallas] Athene justified in punishing sacrilege, was Arachne a poet in the image of Ovid himself – and answers himself: "Neither one nor the other." [. . .] The author of the *Metamorphoses* gives a place to "all the stories or implied stories that flow in every direction . . . to be sure of presenting no partial design but rather a living multiplicity that excludes no god known or unknown. (129)

After encountering Calvino's interpretation, Byatt writes in "Arachne," it "is a shock to realize that perhaps Arachne won. That was not the way we learned it as children" (143). A similar sense of uncertainty carries over, in turn, to the struggle between Emily and Miss Crichton-Walker. "Emily might be thought to have won, since she had held to her purpose successfully," writes the narrator, not only by passing her exams but continuing on to university to study French (*Sugar* 30). This initial proposition is revised, however, by the narrator's observation that "Miss Crichton-Walker might be thought to have won," since Emily breaks down after her exams and is sent home "under strict injunctions not to open a book, and was provided by her mother with a piece of petit-point to do through the long summer, a Victorian pattern" (30). Miss Crichton-Walker's "victory" is also implicit in the story's ending, in which Emily, as a mother, takes on the mantle of authority by interfering in her daughter's education. Channeling the spirit of her former headmistress, she argues that Sarah ought to be allowed to study French even though it is implied that her daughter, in a mirror image of her mother's unconventional connection with Racine, has developed an idiosyncratic passion for mathematics. Where Miss Crichton-Walker weighed down Emily with the burden of her own prejudices and expectations, so now Emily repeats the cycle of "confusing Sarah's best interests with" her "own unfulfilled ambitions" (31).

The ironic tone of Byatt's narrator ("you will ask"), combined with Calvino's insistence that the Ovidean myth on which the story is partly based leads to a reading that moves beyond the contest in order to defy any specific outcome: the "winner" in this situation is not the point of the story. Instead, what matters

is the dynamic interplay of the text's multiple threads, the tensions that, while apparently moving in different, even opposing directions nonetheless characterize its diegetic space. The temptation to ask "who won?" is an unfortunate ideological impulse of the contemporary reader, as Byatt explores in her essay "The One Bright Book of Life" (2001). Such a narrow way of reading, she contends, emerges from "a context where literary criticism, and the teaching of literature, became a belief system, and indeed a societal structure" characterized by a "kind of moral fervour" that assumes "the reader is there to sit in judgement" ("One"). The frustration with such close-minded interpretations, as expressed in "Racine and the Tablecloth," establishes a more general critique of ideological reading that sets the tone for the next decade of Byatt's work, in which she will explore the limitations of interpretation in longer works like *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* and shorter pieces like "The Chinese Lobster" and "Body Art" (in *Little Black Book of Stories* [2003]). The true subversion in her approach to literature and art is that, like one of her key artistic heroes, Matisse, she is willing to question progressive, revolutionary ideas while assigning revolutionary value to things that are generally not considered subversive, that indeed may normally be seen as reactionary: masculinity, order, rationality, classicism, domestic arts, and so on. This approach is successful precisely because it "does not proceed from liberalism but from perversion," in the words of Barthes, so that "the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural" (*Pleasure* 31). Trying to assess a "winner" in these situations, or didactically championing one side over the other – Racine over the tablecloth, the intellectual life over the domestic – is to miss the point of Byatt's story, for the text "cannot be reduced to the struggle between two rival ideologies: it is the subversion of all ideology which is in question" (32). The fabric of Byatt's story, woven from the threads supplied by Ovid, Euripides, Racine, together with her own life experiences, creates a text marked by the inherent multiplicity that is the characteristic of all writing, of all discourse. "Racine and the Tablecloth," coming as it does at a pivotal point in Byatt's career, thus contains a model for reading and interpretation that casts light on the complex multiplicity that underlies her later, better-known works.

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